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ABSTRACT

This preliminary paper reviews the political and cultural history of the Cambodian refugees who have settled in large numbers in California communities. The kingdom of Cambodia was a major power in Southeast Asia from the ninth century A.D. until March 1970, and its Buddhist culture influenced the dance, music, architecture, and linguistic traditions of neighboring states. Under Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia was the first of the Indochinese states to win independence from France in 1953, and it attempted to remain neutral in the second Indochina war (1961-75). General Lon Nol replaced Sihanouk after a military coup in 1970, and the country aligned itself with the United States and the Republic of Viet Nam. Monarchist loyalists and the small Cambodian communist party, the Khmer Rouge, supported Sihanouk's government-in-exile, and waged civil war. The Khmer Rouge seized the capital in April 1975, ending the civil war and beginning a four-year reign of terror that included the execution of one to three million Cambodians and massive resettlement programs that destroyed normal family life. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled to Thailand in 1979, and from there over 200,000 Cambodians have emigrated to other countries. Seventy-five thousand refugees now reside in California. The refugees must cope with post-traumatic stress; family disintegration; and concern for lost, displaced or disabled relatives in Southeast Asia. A brief list of readings is included. (FMW)

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CULTURE IN CRISIS CAMBODIAN REFUGEES IN CALIFORNIA

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I. SUMMARY

Major Cambodian refugee communities have come into existence in California over the past decade. Khmer (Cambodian) refugees must cope with post-traumatic stress, family disintegration, and concern for lost, displaced or disabled relatives in Southeast Asia. Can Cambodian culture survive in California and other states such as Arizona which host significant refugee communities?

II. CAMBODIA AND THE CULTURE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

Cambodia enjoys a special position in the culture history of the Southeast Asian geographical region. First of the "Indianized States" to rise to prominence in the region a thousand years ago, the culture of Cambodia has received universal recognition for the elegance of its stone monuments, the sophistication of its ancient hydraulics and the elegance of its performing arts. A kingdom from the ninth century A.D. until March 1970, Cambodia at one time was the paramount power on the mainland of Southeast Asia heavily influencing the dance, music, architecture and linguistic traditions of neighboring states. The Empire of Angkor, symbolized by the great monuments just north of the city of Siem Reap in northwestern Cambodia, dominated what is now Thailand and Laos from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries.

Hinduism and subsequently Buddhism greatly influenced the development of Khmer culture. The language and folk culture of Cambodia, however, predate contact from India, reflecting concerns for ancestors and nature spirits. Cambodian culture exemplifies many characteristic aspects of the arts, society and economy common to mainland Southeast Asian cultures of the plains and river valleys. Based on an economy of padi rice agriculture, embracing a Buddhist belief system and rooted in loyalty to the monarchy Cambodia in recent times has persevered as a relatively weak but culturally integral and ethnically homogeneous polity and national culture. Cambodian courts produced beautiful sarongs of silk and jewelery of gold and revelled in fragrant incense and exotic perfumes. Cambodia has been honored with the attention of explorers, archeologists and tourists who

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in past years came to witness mute and beautiful stone vestiges of former Khmer power and glory at the temple complex of Angkor Wat.

Since the Thai defeat of Angkor in the mid thirteenth century Cambodia has been experiencing an inexorable decline. Over the past five hundred years Khmer territory in the southeast has been absorbed by an ever expanding Vietnam. Thailand conquered much of the former western reaches of the Angkor Empire, acquiring as late as 1943 three Cambodian provinces during World War II. Over the past three centuries Cambodia has continually lost territory, been defeated in successive wars with Cham, Thai and Vietnamese neighbors and gradually changed from regional pre-colonial super-power to fragile dependent state with a future clouded by the horrors of the recent past and the uncertainties of the immediate future.

Independence, Neutrality and Monarchy.

France declared Cambodia a protectorate in 1863, probably saving it from ultimate political dismemberment at the hands of the Thai and the Vietnamese. Several decades later (?) Cambodia formally was incorporated into the French colonial empire as a constituent state of French Indochina. French colonial agents skillfully played the Norodom and Sisowath wings of the royal family off against one another so as to extract maximum leverage on the conduct of Cambodian internal affairs. In 1941 Norodom Sihanouk was selected by the French as the most pliable of princely candidates to succeed to the throne in Phnom Penh. Early on he fulfilled the expectations of his colonial benefactors, developing a reputation as a mindless playboy and sometime jazz artist. Within a few years however Prince Sihanouk turned his attention to the preservation of Cambodian national integrity in a hostile Southeast Asian political arena. Due to the tireless efforts of Sihanouk, Cambodia was the first of the Indochinese states to win independence from France in 1953.

Cambodia struggled to remain neutral between the years 1953 (when independence was achieved) and 1970. As the American role in the second Indochina war (1961-75) grew ever more pronounced Sihanouk and Cambodia became enmeshed in a deathly web of international intrigue from which there was no escape. Either provide sanctuary for Vietnamese communist forces in eastern Cambodia and thus relinquish in part national sovereignty or become allies of the Americans and South Vietnamese and risk outright conflict with North Vietnam. Cambodia under Sihanouk elected to maintain official neutrality while overlooking the sanctuaries of Vietnamese communist forces in eastern

Cambodia. In the end the Cambodian military establishment overthrew Sihanouk in March 1970 and quickly made common cause with Washington and Saigon.

THE INDOCHINA WAR ENGULFS CAMBODIA 1970-75

General Lon Nol replaced the Cambodian monarchy with a republican form of government. Several weeks after taking power, Cambodia was overrun first by South Vietnamese and then by American troops in search of the elusive headquarters of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. As the Cambodian government abandoned neutrality and allied with the Government of the Republic of Vietnam and the United States civil war erupted throughout Cambodia. Monarchist loyalists refused to accept the overthrow of Sihanouk, who remained popular in vast areas of the countryside even as disaffected urbanites yearned for a new order in Phnom Penh. The small Cambodian communist movement (commonly termed the Khmer Rouge {"Red Khmer"}) gained training, arms and outright support from north Vietnamese forces shortly after Sihanouk's overthrow. Sihanouk travelled to Peking and established a royal government in exile, forging an alliance with the indigenous Cambodian communist movement in an attempt to regain his throne and nation.

In 1973 American and Vietnamese negotiators agreed upon a bombing halt over Vietnam at the Paris peace talks. The full fury of the Strategic Air Command was turned against Cambodia at this time. More bombs were dropped on Cambodia in a ten month period in 1973 than on Japan during all of World War II. The consequences of the overthrow of Sihanouk and entry of Cambodia into the Indochina War theatre were disastrous. Half a million Cambodians died between 1970 and 1975; starvation stalked a war ravaged land as hundreds of thousands of refugees sought safe haven from the countryside in Phnom Penh. A minor communist movement with little prospect of ever achieving political credibility much less power in 1970 was propelled by events into becoming a disciplined military and formidable administrative force. Before Saigon was evacuated by the Americans and prior to the communist assumption of power in Vientiane Khmer Rouge forces marched into Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975.

Auto-Genocide

The end of the civil war in Cambodia was greeted with relief and longing for peace by all citizens of the land. Few Cambodians chose to leave their homeland just prior to the fall of the discredited Lon Nol regime, preferring to make their peace with victorious Khmer

Rouge who promised to restore peace and neutrality to Cambodia. Between April 1975 and December 1978 a reign of terror was visited upon Cambodia unparalleled in recent human history. Although the examples of the massacres of the Armenians by the hands of the Turks during World War I and the holocaust which befell the Jews of Europe are often brought to mind in discussions of Khmer Rouge rule such examples of Twentieth Century inhumanity differ in one significant aspect from events in Cambodia. For the victims of the Khmer Rouge were in general neither despised minorities nor alien populations. Khmer oppressed and brutally murdered other Khmer, visiting losses upon an already weak and fragile Cambodia which make the ultimate recovery of national sovereignty for Cambodia today at best problematic. Between one and three million Cambodians died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in less than four years of communist rule. The government of the Khmer Rouge, heavily influenced by Maoist philosophy of total and continuing revolution, pursued the goal of completely restructuring Cambodian society. The institutions most closely identified with the structure of pre-revolutionary society--- the family, the Buddhist religion and the monarchy were attacked with unprecedented fury.

Cities were evacuated and urban residents were resettled in village locales. Dawn to dusk work schedules were imposed. Families were often split up, with older children being assigned to mobile labor brigades. Large transfers of rural populations from east to west were undertaken. Communal kitchens were instituted crushing one of the last vestiges of normal family life in revolutionary Cambodia.

Theravada Buddhism is the faith of the vast majority of Cambodians. During the Khmer Rouge administration of the country monks were disrobed, images of the Buddha were destroyed and temples were transformed into warehouses or empty shells. Adherence to Marxist-Leninist dogma and state sponsored weddings was substituted for the traditional fealty of Cambodians to the sangha (the monkhood).

The Cambodian monarchy has always symbolized the unity of the state, the cultural integrity of the Khmer people and the long and glorious history of this most ancient of Southeast Asian nation-states. Followers of Prince Sihanouk loyally joined Khmer Rouge led resistance forces during the 1970-75 war against the government of Lon Nol. After the communist victory Prince Sihanouk returned to Phnom Penh from Peking to be placed under virtual house arrest. His royalist followers were summoned to special meetings "to meet the Prince and receive rewards for loyal service". Almost all were executed at such jungle rendezvous.

In the span of a decade the neutrality and peaceful tranquility of Cambodia had been brutally shattered. Institutions central to the Khmer identity--- the family, the monarchy and Buddhist religion--- were maligned,crippled and attacked. Between ten and twenty five percent of the 1970 Khmer population perished either during the Lon Nol years (estimated 500,000) or at the hands of the Khmer Rouge (estimates range from one to three million victims).

KHMER DIASPORA

Starved and submissive, tens of thousands of Khmer refugees staggered across the Thai border in 1979 as Vietnamese troops dislodged the Pol Pot government from the seat of power in Phnom Penh. Today over 200,000 Cambodians have made new homes as refugees in third countries of asylum. Another quarter million Khmer reside as displaced persons on the Kampuchea-Thai border, ineligible for refugee status, afraid to return to their Vietnamese dominated homeland and unable to settle in the no man's land between Cambodia and Thailand. Khmer populations are found today in France, Denmark, Italy and Switzerland in Europe, in Australia and New Zealand and in Canada and the United States in North America.

There is no previous history of Khmer migration, especially Khmer migration to cities, nations and continents far from their native Southeast Asia. Unlike groups such as the Thai which are known to have migrated to Southeast Asia from southern China in past centuries, or the Hmong for whom migration has become a way of life, the people of Cambodia have been always closely tied to their native land. As far as is known the Khmer language and people have sprung from the soil of their native Cambodia. And yet, faced with the dissolution of the family, the destruction of Buddhist shrines, the crushing of the monarchy and the invasion of their traditional enemies the Vietnamese, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians have fled their homeland since 1979.

GENESIS OF KHMER-CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY

California has historically been host to the earliest and the largest Asian immigrant communities to the United States. Major Chinese, Japanese, and Indo-Pakistani communities came into existence in the nineteenth century here. Shortly after American

conquest of the Philippines early Southeast Asian immigrants landed in California. Today Pilipinos are the largest Asian American community in California.

Significant foreign enclave Khmer communities could be found only in Thai border provinces prior to the mid-twentieth century. No Khmer population of consequence existed in the western World until the overthrow of Prince Sihanouk in 1970. A small exile community then came into being in France. The Khmer population in the United States in 1974 consisted of a moderately sized embassy staff in Washington and several score students scattered about the United States. It would be difficult to imagine that more than 750 Cambodians resided in the United States in 1974

Today 175,000 Cambodians live in America and at least 75,000 of that number reside in California. Cambodian refugees were resettled in the U.S. in widely dispersed locales across the country. Despite this plan Cambodians have come to focus secondary resettlement destinations in three states, Massachusetts, Texas and particularly in California. Long Beach, California is the Khmer capital of the United States with at least 20,000 residents. Stockton in northern California hosts 10,000 Cambodians. Major communities are found also in San Diego, San Jose, Los Angeles proper and in San Francisco.

Khmer Culture in Crisis

Recent studies, long term personal observations and the concerns of Cambodian community leaders in California all suggest that Khmer in the California diaspora continue to confront major problems. Although the difficulties and traumas encountered by the Khmer are not necessarily distinct from those of other refugee communities, they do differ in scale and intensity. The consequences of the attempted destruction of central Cambodian institutions such as the family, the monarchy and the Buddhist religion continue to be expressed in intra-familial tensions, personal psychological trauma and school and work adaptation problems.

Due to the losses incurred during the Cambodian holocaust, many Cambodian refugee families are directed by single parents, have become dispersed and separated from displaced loved ones and experience continuing stress. Because of the general poverty of the Cambodian refugee community, Buddhist religious institutions capable of effectively serving the emotional and acculturative needs of the Khmer in California have been slow to

develop. Christian missionaries have made some inroads in the Cambodian community. Although the Cambodian monarchy was overthrown in 1970. Prince Sihanouk continues to play an important role in Cambodian affairs. More than any other single Cambodian figure, he personifies Cambodian political and cultural continuity at a time when the future existence of Cambodia as an independent state is very much in doubt. Most Cambodian refugees in the United States today are passionately concerned about political events in Southeast Asia, hope to return to Cambodia some day, and are torn between the demands of adaptation to American life and loyalty to a beloved if tortured Cambodian homeland.

Can Cambodian culture survive in a far flung diaspora in the western world? Is it possible that shattered families, sundered religious institutions, and suppressed cultural traditions might appear, grow and flourish in far flung American resettlement locales? To what extent do refugee resettlement agencies, social service workers and especially teachers in the schools appreciate the national trauma, comprehend the cultural depth and empathize with the struggle to revive, renew and preserve Cambodian culture?. To what extent has the culture of Cambodia (ranging from language to music, dance and even cuisine) already begun to significantly impact the United States?

KHMER RENAISSANCE---CALIFORNIA PERSPECTIVE

My presentation will explore the depth of Cambodian culture and will suggest that even in the far flung California Khmer diaspora performing arts, Buddhist religion and nationalist sentiment are renascent. I will touch upon crucial factors which currently constrain adaptation of Cambodian refugees, issues which have been largely ignored by social service and educational institutions charged with the organization of refugee programs. Finally, I will suggest several strategies for educators to build upon the strengths of this community, share widely the Cambodian experience and explore present and prospective contributions of Cambodians to multi-cultural America.

READINGS

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1986

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Simon and Schuster

Chanda, Nayan
1986

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Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich

Kiernan, Ben
1985

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Verso Press

Schanberg, Sydney
1985

The Death and Life of Dith Pran
Penguin

Shawcross, William
1979

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Holocaust and Modern Conscience.*